

Konrad Hirschler / Sarah Bowen Savant

## Introduction – What is in a Period? Arabic Historiography and Periodization

**Abstract:** This article introduces the question of periodization in a comparative perspective under three headings: space, subject matter, and agency. The issue of space has deeply influenced reflections on periodization as is, evident, for instance, within changed frameworks such as global history and new fields of study, such as Mediterranean or Indian Ocean Studies. For the Middle East, the rise of the concept of Late Antiquity has proven to be a particularly fruitful spatial reconfiguration that has changed established notions of periodization. The second major impact on the questions of periodization has come from changing thematic foci, most importantly, the diversification of historical studies away from the primacy of political history. In the field of Middle Eastern history, this has been particularly pertinent on account of the prominent position that dynastic periodizations have held. Finally, notions of periodization have undergone changes as the question of historical agency has been reconsidered. In the study of non-European history, such changes emerged in particular as an outcome of reflections on the degree to which such societies' histories followed patterns derived from European models. The article argues that the contributions to this volume open up new venues to think of the question of periodization in Middle Eastern history by taking a long-term perspective from early Islam to the present day.

**Keywords:** periodization, spatial turn, historical agency.

---

**Konrad Hirschler:** SOAS, University of London, kh20@soas.ac.uk

**Sarah Bowen Savant:** Aga Khan University, Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations, London, sarah.savant@aku.edu

In making sense of time and developing notions of periodization, historians play a major role for their societies as they help to set the boundaries of a culture's historical consciousness.<sup>1</sup> This is true of professional historians, but also of the many

---

<sup>1</sup> We would like to thank those who contributed to making this special issue possible: The AKU-ISMC and SOAS for their financial support, the contributors for working towards tight deadlines, the editors of *Der Islam* for agreeing to take this project on, Hanna Siurua for copy editing and all those who have been involved over the past six years in the "Arabic Pasts: Histories and Historiography" workshop series.

other persons – journalists, devisers of curricula, film-makers, and so forth – who narrate the past. Such divisions are generally based on perceived turning points, watershed moments in which life as then known somehow changed. One has only to think of the concept of European “modernity,” in distinction to the “medieval” or the South Asian tripartite division of history into ancient/Hindu, medieval/Muslim, and modern/British to appreciate how a label can frame societies’ views of their own place in history.<sup>2</sup>

This special issue engages broadly with the issue of periodization in Arabic history writing, taking into consideration periodizations used today as well as those of earlier times. In other fields, periodization has received a lot of attention, for example, in the Anglophone world in the work of Reinhart KOSSELLECK, which has been particularly influential.<sup>3</sup> As the following survey shows, in our field, namely, history written in Arabic, periodization has often been subject to debate, no less so than in the fields of European or South Asian history. The specific contribution of this special issue lies in the fact that it has brought together specialists working across a broad chronological range, so that tenth-century perceptions of the Jāhiliyya feature alongside contemporary Saudi treatments of the more recent past. We did not opt for this chronological range because we assume that these cases are underlain by some essentialist Arabic (or Islamic) notion of periodization. Rather, the aim was to inject a stronger critical reflection on periodization than has been common in our field in recent times by bringing together case studies from different eras that address common problems beyond the immediate chronological and historical context.

The articles were produced through the now-annual “Arabic Pasts: Histories and Historiography” workshop, held since 2008 in London and Oxford. The workshop aims to foster new approaches to the field of Arabic historiography by gathering together specialists working on different periods and geographies. It

---

2 C. Warren HOLLISTER, “The Phases of European History and the Nonexistence of the Middle Ages,” *Pacific Historical Review* 61, no. 1 (1992): 1–22. Harbans MUKHIA, “Medieval India: An Alien Conceptual Hegemony?” *The Medieval History Journal* 1, no. 1 (1998): 91–105. Dipesh CHAKRABARTY, “The Time of History and the Times of God,” *The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital*, ed. Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 35–60.

3 Reinhart KOSSELLECK, *Zeitschichten: Studien zur Historik* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2000). On Koselleck’s reception see Helge JORDHEIM, “Against Periodization: Koselleck’s Theory of Multiple Temporalities,” *History and Theory* 51, no. 2 (2012): 151–71. Koselleck’s thought has also contributed to discussions of secularization and modernity. See, e.g., Timo PANKAKOSKI, “Reoccupying Secularization: Schmitt and Koselleck on Blumenberg’s Challenge,” *History and Theory* 52, no. 2 (2013): 214–45.

has been co-organized in its different incarnations by (in chronological order of involvement) Hugh Kennedy (SOAS, University of London), James McDougall (University of Oxford), Konrad Hirschler (SOAS, University of London), Sarah Bowen Savant (AKU-ISMC) and Julia Bray (University of Oxford). The 2012 meeting, co-organized by the Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations and SOAS, was held under the heading “What is in a Period?” and resulted in the present special issue. The paper of Edward McALLISTER was read at the 2013 workshop in Oxford, which had the title “Social Memory in the Middle East and North Africa”; as his paper also bore directly on the 2012 theme, we include it in the issue.

What follows here is a discussion of periodization in Arabic historiography that situates our issue within the wider historical field and highlights the most salient questions that historians debate as they press the flow of time into frames. These questions are addressed in various ways by the contributors and fall under three headings: space (What is the interplay between a geographical area and a given periodization?), subject matter (How has periodization been informed by historians’ subjects of enquiry?), and agency (To what extent does the history of a given society or group possess its “own” periodization?).

## Time and Space

The spatial turn of the last decades has reinserted the geographical imagination as a crucial category of analysis into the humanities and social sciences.<sup>4</sup> The challenge to link time and space came originally from many quarters, including cultural studies, as summarized by Lawrence Grossberg’s call for “the timing of space and the spacing of time.”<sup>5</sup> Time exists only within space; each calls the other into existence. Some measures of time are literally inconceivable, if only for lack of a space that would render them meaningful. With temporal coincidence, simultaneity – simultaneous, separate existences – becomes possible, and thus

---

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Albrecht CLASSEN and Christopher R. CLASON, *Rural Space in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Age: The Spatial Turn in Premodern Studies* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012).

<sup>5</sup> Lawrence GROSSBERG, “The Space of Culture, the Power of Space,” in *The Post-Colonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons*, ed. Iain Chambers and Lidia Curti (New York: Routledge, 1996), 169–89. For a discussion of the modern history of the linkage of time and space, see also Stephen KERN, *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880–1918* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983).

the definition of a community and its identity.<sup>6</sup> Several spatial reorientations have profoundly impacted how historians working on Arabic sources treat time. Each presupposes a different simultaneity and territory in which time could be experienced as a unified whole either by a population or, for analytical purposes, by historians. To start with the largest, take the turn toward “global” or “world” history approaches,<sup>7</sup> including the creation of university programs, museum exhibits, and broadcast programs (e.g., “The History of the World in 100 Objects,” by The British Museum and BBC Radio 4), textbooks, and even novels. World history approaches both shrink space, as they make geographically disparate phenomena into contemporaries, and stretch time, as they show the finitude of this or that empire, seen within the much wider context of the history of all empires – or even the millions of years of geological history.<sup>8</sup> Thus in Marshall G. S. HODGSON’s iconoclastic *Venture of Islam*, one finds a chart entitled “The Origins of Islamic Culture in Its World Context, 226–715,” which shows the simultaneity of moments in the history of the four regions that he classifies as Western Europe, “From Nile to Oxus,” India and China. And so Muḥammad occupies a single world stage with the pope Gregory the Great (590–604); Harsha, who rules (from 606–647) the last major Hindu empire of north India; and the T’ang dynasty, which continues a “Chinese political and commercial resurgence.”<sup>9</sup> Muḥammad’s moment in history – and indeed, Islam’s in general – is meanwhile shown to be rather small in a timeline entitled “The Place of Islam in the Chronology of World History,” which begins with 10,000 BC and presents Islam as emerging only in a “post-axial” age that began in 200 BC (the last, “technical age” beginning seemingly only yesterday, in 1800) (see diagram).<sup>10</sup>

6 Benedict ANDERSON, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 1991), 30.

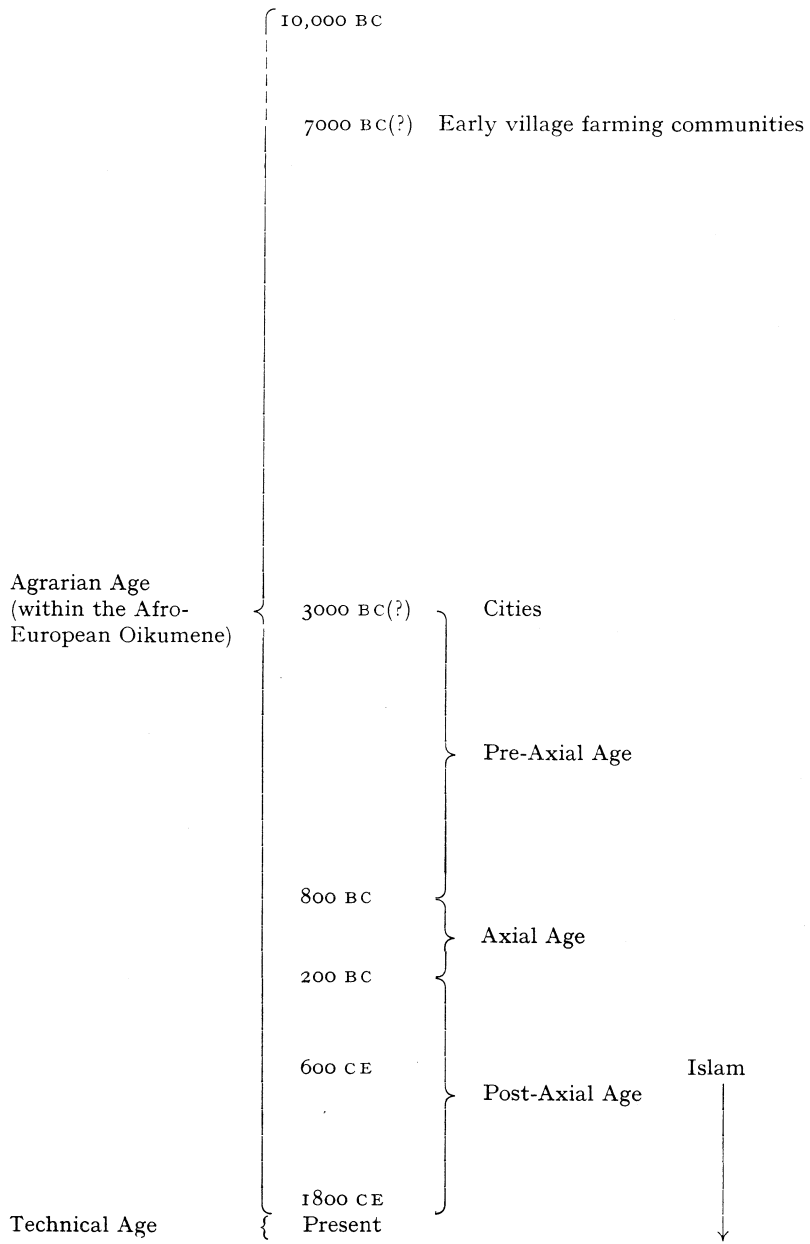
7 See esp. *The American Historical Review* 1996 special issue, “Periodization in World History,” including Patrick MANNING, “The Problem of Interactions in World History,” *The American Historical Review* 101, no. 3 (1996): 771–82 and Jerry BENTLEY, “Cross-Cultural Interaction and Periodization in World History,” 749–70.

8 Or the history of the cosmos, see <http://www.chronozoom.com/#/t000000000-0000-0000-0000-000000000000>.

9 HODGSON, *The Venture of Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 1:139. See also his posthumously published *Rethinking World History: Essays on Europe, Islam, and World History*, ed. Edmund Burke III (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

10 HODGSON, *The Venture of Islam*, 1:113; see also 126–27.

The Place of Islam in the Chronology of World History



Marshall HODGSON, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), I, 113. © University of Chicago Press.

The most prominent case of spatial reorientation in our field is the rise of “Late Antiquity” as a period and a recognized academic field from the 1960s onward.<sup>11</sup> Peter BROWN’s delineation of a Late Antique world proceeds from a focus on the Mediterranean as a system of transport and includes, in addition to its shores Mesopotamia, and more tangentially, Iran as major theatres of change. He addressed “a crucial question in world history; how the exceptionally homogeneous Mediterranean world of c. 200 AD became divided into the three mutually estranged societies of the Middle Ages: Catholic Western Europe, Byzantium and Islam.”<sup>12</sup> When, in BROWN’s narrative, Muḥammad and the Arabs enter as “the new participants,” the final developments of Late Antiquity are launched, culminating in the shift of authority to Baghdad and the Islamization of Persians, with “the traditions of Khusro I Anoshirwan” winning “over those of Justinian.”<sup>13</sup> For historians afterward, putting early Islamic history into a Late Antique framework has meant treating the life of Muḥammad or the conquests as episodes in a longer vision of history, rather than as singular turning points. Now, Late Antiquity, as the context for the rise of Islam, has become the new orthodoxy, for which BROWN and a number of other scholars can take credit.<sup>14</sup> This is exemplified by comparing the 1970 and 2010 editions of *The Cambridge History of Islam*. The first edition, published just before BROWN’s book, contained a mere chapter on pre-Islamic Arabia as an antecedent to Islam,<sup>15</sup> whereas the *The New Cambridge History of Islam* starts with “the Late Antique context.”<sup>16</sup> Academic works also treat an “Islamic Late Antiquity,”<sup>17</sup> “Late Antique

---

**11** For French antecedents, see esp. Peter BROWN, “The World of Late Antiquity Revisited,” *Symbolae Osloenses* 72 (1997): 5–30 and 70–80 and Robert MARKUS, “Between Marrou and Brown: Transformations of Late Antique Christianity,” in *Transformations of Late Antiquity: Essays for Peter Brown*, ed. Philip Rousseau and Emmanuel Papoutsakis (Farnham, England: Ashgate, 2009), 1ff. For an argument about the earlier emergence of late antiquity as a period among art historians, see Jaś ELSNER, “The Birth of Late Antiquity: RIEGL and STRZYGOWSKI in 1901,” *Art History* 25 (2002): 358–379.

**12** From the back cover of BROWN’s *The World of Late Antiquity, AD 150–750* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1971; repr., 2006).

**13** BROWN, *World of Late Antiquity*, 200.

**14** E.g., Averil CAMERON, in works such as *The Mediterranean World in Late Antiquity, AD 395–700*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2011).

**15** P. M. HOLT, Ann K. S. LAMBTON, and Bernard LEWIS, eds., *The Cambridge History of Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

**16** Chase F. ROBINSON, ed., *The New Cambridge History of Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

**17** See Thomas SZGORICH, “Narrative and Community in Islamic Late Antiquity,” *Past & Present* 185 (2004): 9–42.

Iran,”<sup>18</sup> the idea of a “long” Late Antiquity,<sup>19</sup> and other topics; history curricula have been rewritten to begin with Late Antiquity; and academic appointments have been created – all built on the territorial emphases of Brown’s original work.<sup>20</sup>

Other prominent cases of spatial reconfigurations include bodies of water as forces of unity rather than sources of division, represented not just by the emphasis on “Mediterranean studies”<sup>21</sup> but also by new work on the Indian Ocean, the Red Sea, and the Persian Gulf. Fernand BRAUDEL had already worked with a Mediterranean frame of reference for the sixteenth century,<sup>22</sup> his work serving as a source of inspiration for K. N. CHAUDHURI’s study on the Indian Ocean.<sup>23</sup> These spatial shifts in the way that history is written also influence the periodization of regional histories that had previously been considered as compartmentalized units. BRAUDEL, for instance, could integrate the regions bordering the Mediterranean into a unified chronological rhythm at least for “geographical time” and to some extent also for “social time.”

In our issue, Antoine BORRUT reminds us that the question of space and time is not only one for modern historiography but that it plays also a crucial role in how spatial shifts within the early Islamic polities impacted on contemporary ideas of periodization. His argument that Syrian history fell victim to the

---

**18** Recent efforts include Parvaneh POURSHARIATI’s *Decline and Fall of the Sasanian Empire: The Sasanian-Parthian Confederacy and the Arab Conquest of Iran* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2008) and Teresa BERNHEIMER and Adam J. SILVERSTEIN, eds., *Late Antiquity: Eastern Perspectives* (Warminster: Gibb Memorial Trust, 2012). But on challenges, see esp. Joel T. WALKER, “The Limits of Late Antiquity: Philosophy between Rome and Iran,” *The Ancient World* 33, no. 1 (2002): 45–69.

**19** E.g., see Timothy POWER, “Conclusion: The ‘Long’ Late Antiquity from the Perspective of the Red Sea,” in *The Red Sea from Byzantium to the Caliphate AD 500–1000* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2012), pp. 189 ff.; see now also Garth FOWDEN, *Before and After Muhammad: The First Millennium Refocused* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013).

**20** The bibliography on Late Antiquity as a period is rapidly expanding; see, e.g., *The Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity*, ed. Scott Fitzgerald JOHNSON (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

**21** This trend is evident in the foundation in 1994 of the Mediterranean Studies Association, with its own journal, a flourishing H-Net discussion list, and the establishment of study programs such as the Center for European and Mediterranean Studies at New York University and the Middle East and Mediterranean Studies Programme at King’s College London. For early critiques, see Peregrine HORDEN and Nicholas PURCELL, “The Mediterranean and ‘the New Thalassology,’” *The American Historical Review* 111, no. 3 (2006): 722–40.

**22** Fernand BRAUDEL, *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l’époque de Philippe II* (Paris: Colin, 1949).

**23** K. N. CHAUDHURI, *Asia before Europe: Economy and Civilisation of the Indian Ocean from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

“politics of periodization” offers a particularly pertinent case study of how space and periodization are intrinsically linked. Nils RIECKEN, in turn, tackles the interconnectedness of space and time in his contribution on the Moroccan historian and intellectual Abdallah Laroui. He shows how Laroui problematizes the use of “universals” in conceptualizations of the past – universals that would allow placing various regional histories in a global timeline of development. Laroui’s use of multiple temporalities, however, refutes such universal concepts and grounds them rather in specific spatial frameworks, which in turn require their own periodizations.

## Time and Subject Matter

Historians became increasingly interested in periodization during the second half of the twentieth century also because the very subject matter of history was becoming increasingly plural. The move away from political history and elite culture’s primacy rendered previously unproblematic chronological concepts, such as periodization according to dynasties, increasingly untenable – or at least debatable. The rise of multiple, often overlapping histories, be they social history, cultural history, gender history, or historical anthropology, undermined established chronological frameworks as these frameworks lost their analytical usefulness for a growing number of historians. Among the many works that have reflected this trend one might cite Joan KELLY-GADOL’s “Did Women Have a Renaissance?”<sup>24</sup> Here, she called into question “accepted schemas of periodization” and argued that notions associated with the Renaissance were inherently valid for men, while women experienced this period in a very different way.<sup>25</sup> In the same vein, social historians were, in the words of Peter N. STEARNS, searching for an “appropriate sociohistorical periodization.”<sup>26</sup>

The primacy of political history and its concomitant dynastic periodizations was – and to some extent is – particularly strong in the field of Middle Eastern history, where areas of specialization have traditionally been drawn along dynastic lines: “a historian of the ‘Abbāsid period,” “a specialist on the Fatimid era,”

---

<sup>24</sup> KELLY-GADOL, “Did Women Have a Renaissance?,” in *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, ed. Renate Bridenthal and Claudia Koonz (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977), 137–64.

<sup>25</sup> KELLY-GADOL, “Did Women Have a Renaissance?” 137.

<sup>26</sup> STEARNS, “Toward a Wider Vision: Trends in Social History,” in *The Past before Us: Contemporary Historical Writing in the United States*, ed. Michael Kammen (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980), 224.



or “an expert on the Ottoman age.” One of the outcomes of this enduring primacy of political history was the crucial position that 1258 and the end of the ‘Abbāsīd dynasty long held as a turning point in Middle Eastern history. For instance, in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Egypt the primacy of political history was evident in the varying strategies for conceptualizing specific fields of history within a wider reconceptualization of the past that took place in these years.<sup>27</sup> When the Egyptian author Ḥasan Tawfīq al-‘Adl (1862–1904) wrote his *History of Arabic Literature* he divided his work into five analytical categories: pre-Islamic, Umayyad, ‘Abbāsīd, Andalusian, and later.<sup>28</sup> His inclusion of a spatial category shows again the close link between space and time – and also the special place that al-Andalus had in Egypt in his day (and indeed in the romantic imagination of many generations). Yet for our purposes here the main point is how the primacy of dynastic categories affected fields well beyond political history, including the history of Arabic literature. The more famous successor to al-‘Adl’s work, under the same title, by Jurjī ZAYDĀN (1861–1941) conceptualized the development of Arabic literature in six steps, but the dynastic foci and watershed moments defined along the lines of political history remained: pre-Islamic, early Islamic, Umayyad, ‘Abbāsīd up to the Seljuq conquest of Baghdad in 1055, the subsequent period up to Napoleon’s conquest of Egypt in 1798, and finally the last period up to his present.<sup>29</sup>

The field of Middle Eastern history has developed fundamentally since these early beginnings, and since the 1980s we have seen the emergence of a stronger research interest in the fragmentation of the ‘Abbāsīd empire from the ninth century onward and in a “postclassical” era that does not presuppose 1258 as the dividing line separating it from a “classical” age. On the surface, the notion of 1258 as a turning point, followed by a decline, has all but disappeared, playing hardly any role in major current textbooks.<sup>30</sup> Albert HOURANI, for instance,

<sup>27</sup> Yoav DI-CAPUA, *Gatekeepers of the Arab Past: Historians and History Writing in 20th Century Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

<sup>28</sup> Ḥasan Tawfīq AL-‘ADL, *Ta’rīkh ādāb al-lughā al-‘arabiyya* (Cairo: Maṭba‘at al-funūn, 1906). Undoubtedly his studies in Germany had influenced him as much as his acquaintance with the work of the orientalist of his day, most importantly Carl Brockelmann. On this, see Jan BRUGMAN, *An Introduction to the History of Modern Arabic Literature in Egypt* (Leiden: Brill, 1984), 327–30.

<sup>29</sup> Jurjī ZAYDĀN, *Ta’rīkh ādāb al-lughā al-‘arabiyya* (Cairo: al-Hilāl, 1911–13).

<sup>30</sup> However, the final volume of *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature, Arabic Literature in the Post-Classical Period*, ed. Roger Allen and D. S. Richards (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), shows that 1258 and its connotations have not entirely disappeared. For a critique of this volume’s conceptualization, see Thomas BAUER, “In Search of ‘Post-Classical’ Literature:

started his book with two parts running from the seventh to the tenth and from the eleventh to the fifteenth century, respectively.<sup>31</sup> In similar terms, Ira LAPIDUS has the second part of his book starting in the tenth century,<sup>32</sup> and Jonathan BERKEY positions the period of “Medieval Islam” between the years 1000 and 1500.<sup>33</sup> But even pioneers in these developments have tended to cling to political history and dynastic periodization. Consequently, we have histories focused on the Buyid, Saffarid, Fatimid, and Samanid periods. Likewise, for the “postclassical” era, we have a *Mamluk Studies Review* and a School of Mamluk Studies, and large-scale research projects are entitled “History and Society during the Mamluk Era” (University of Bonn) and “Mamluk History and Culture” (University of Ghent).

There have been several fundamental challenges to history as told along dynastic lines, especially from historians working in the social sciences, including anthropology, sociology, and urban and economic history. To take just one example, Richard BULLIET argued against history centered on the caliphate in his *Islam: The View from the Edge*.<sup>34</sup> More recently, and inspired by environmental history, BULLIET hypothesized in his 2009 work that a dramatic drop in temperature in the eleventh century, a “Big Chill,” put an end to a long-lasting boom in cotton production on the Iranian plateau.<sup>35</sup> Focusing on the eastern Mediterranean, Ronnie ELLENBLUM argued three years later that the end of the “Medieval Warm” led to a series of cold droughts and other destructive climatic events from the late tenth century onward also in this region.<sup>36</sup> Both authors closely connect

---

A Review Article,” *Mamlūk Studies Review* 11, no. 2 (2007): 137–67. The question of decline has generated a substantial amount of debate for other periods; in the context of the transition from Byzantium to Islam, see most recently Antoine BORRUT, Muriel DEBIÉ, et al., *Le Proche-Orient de Justinien aux Abbassides: peuplement et dynamiques spatiales. Actes du colloque “Continuités de l’Occupation entre les Périodes Byzantine et Abbasside au Proche-Orient, VIIe–IXe Siècles”, Paris, 18–20 Octobre 2007* (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2011) and the useful discussion of Alan WALMSLEY, *Early Islamic Syria: An Archaeological Assessment* (London: Duckworth, 2007), esp. 137 ff.

31 Albert HOURANI, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (London: Faber, 2005).

32 Ira LAPIDUS, *A History of Islamic Societies*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

33 Jonathan BERKEY, *The Formation of Islam: Religion and the Near East, 600–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

34 As Bulliet wrote, “the view from the center portrays Islamic history as an outgrowth from a single nucleus, a spreading inkblot labeled the caliphate.” Richard BULLIET, *Islam: The View from the Edge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 8.

35 Richard BULLIET, *Cotton, Climate, and Camels in Early Islamic Iran: A Moment in World History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

36 Ronnie ELLENBLUM, *The Collapse of the Eastern Mediterranean: Climate Change and the Decline of the East, 950–1072* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

their arguments to political history, most importantly the influx of Central Asian pastoralists, yet their approaches further problematize established periodizations.

The enduring topicality of dynasty-driven periodizations is evident in the contributions to this special issue. Fred DONNER draws attention to the double hermeneutics underlying historical scholarship, as such periodizations were not only the outcome of nineteenth-century historicism and its focus on states, diplomacy, and great men. Rather, they rely also on contemporary chronicles that used caliphate-based periodizations. It is, however, evident that such periodizations sit uneasily with fields such as art history (Donner's ceramics) and architecture. Peter WEBB, in turn, reconsiders the field of literature in order to analyse early Islamic readings of the Jāhiliyya. Highlighting again the importance of looking at how both modern historians and earlier authors have conceptualized the past, he does not question the usefulness of the period itself. Yet he clearly demonstrates how the connotations of this periodization change if a field such as lexicography is taken seriously. Moving to the modern period, Matthias DETERMANN's contribution shows exactly how contemporary monarchies, such as that of Saudi Arabia, start their country's history with the dynasty or, alternatively, integrate the dynasty's history into a longer history of monarchical rule. The focus on a political periodization, and the concomitant exclusion of other periodizations, makes monarchs into the prime agents of history.

## Time and Agency

But who are the agents of history? Whose story do historians narrate, and based upon what sorts of sources? The answers to such questions have profound effects on periodization. The sources that serve as the basis for dynastic histories, for example, tend to privilege the outstanding cultural and intellectual works of a narrow band of courtiers, jurists, and orthodox religious authorities. Such works may have served as classical references for their contemporaries' living, collective memory— but what of society beyond elite circles, and the possibly different, no less historical, rhythms by which “the history of everyday life” of women and workers, for example, moved?<sup>37</sup> What of a deeper history, one “which requires the

---

<sup>37</sup> A reference to Alf LÜDTKE, ed., *The History of Everyday Life: Reconstructing Historical Experiences and Ways of Life*, trans. William Templar (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995). In our field, there are examples of such work, e.g., BULLIET's *Islam: The View from the Edge* for Iran, or for Egypt, Petra M. SIJPESTEIJN, *Shaping a Muslim State: The World of a Mid-Eighth-Century Egyptian Official* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

historian to go beyond the written record in order to revive by memory, imagination and historical sensibility the dead protagonists as those who had been living, acting, continuously placed as we ourselves are, in conditions of negotiation and decision making?”<sup>38</sup>

Periodization itself is often a vehicle of power and site of contest for agents of history. In South Asian history, it was exactly the overcoming of the ancient, medieval, and British periodization, initially only slightly recast in the postcolonial period as Hindu, Muslim, and Modern, that was central to the project of subaltern studies: “In their hands, a revisionist theory of *colonization* thus became a revisionist theory of *periodization*.”<sup>39</sup> One of the most eloquent discussions of this issue has been Dipesh CHAKRABARTY’s *Provincializing Europe*, in which he argued that the European narrative of teleological secularization was central to colonialism. By constituting “historical time as a measure of the cultural distance,”<sup>40</sup> the European center was in exclusive possession of the “modern,” whereas the colonial periphery could enter this period only via the colonial civilizing mission. At the heart of this analysis stands the question of agency, that is, to what extent other world regions are worthy of their own periodization or were simply following European trajectories, ZAYDĀN’s positioning of 1798 as a decisive turning point representing a case in which (proto-)colonial elites limited Middle Eastern societies’ agency in delimitating the transition to the “modern.” The 1798 paradigm came under increasing assault from the 1970s onward from a variety of other directions, most famously – and probably also most controversially – with Peter GRAN’s *Islamic Roots of Capitalism*.<sup>41</sup> GRAN argued for the indigenous roots of a transformation that had been previously mostly ascribed to European expansion with its symbolic date of 1798.<sup>42</sup> Dror ZE’EVI, on the other

---

**38** Mohammed ARKOUN, *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought* (London: Saqi Books and The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2002), 27–28. Arkoun is commenting upon what Paul RICOEUR has termed the history of “having been” (*avoir été*); RICOEUR, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

**39** Bruce W. HOLSINGER, “Medieval Studies, Postcolonial Studies, and the Genealogies of Critique,” *Speculum* 77, no. 4 (2002): 1195–1227, at 1218.

**40** Dipesh CHAKRABARTY, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 7.

**41** Peter GRAN, *Islamic Roots of Capitalism: Egypt, 1760–1840* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979). See also Kenneth M. CUNO, *The Pasha’s Peasants: Land, Society and Economy in Lower Egypt, 1740–1858* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

**42** This reconceptualization of the periodization of modernity appears less controversially and less spectacularly in one of the central works of Albert HOURANI. In the preface to the second edition of his *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*, originally published in 1967, he wrote some fifteen years later:

hand, outlined how the late eighteenth–early nineteenth century might be considered in the framework of global history approaches as an important period of change beyond the dichotomy of Western colonialism and the indigenous colonized.<sup>43</sup> As in the case of South Asia, the rethinking of established periodization in Middle Eastern history was thus intimately linked to questions of agency and the dislocation of Eurocentric approaches. To return to the example of literary history, a book such as Nelly HANNA's detailed study of book culture in pre-1798 Cairo convincingly shows transformations in a section of society that had traditionally been beyond the pale of historians.<sup>44</sup>

MCALLISTER addresses the issue of agency by relying on oral history and presents notions of periodization among contemporary residents of a largely working-class Algiers neighbourhood. He shows how these non-elite residents live with notions of historical time that are influenced by official narratives, but also how they subvert these narratives in multiple ways. WEBB's rethinking of the concept of Jāhiliyya brings up the issue of agency and marginality in two closely connected ways. On the one hand, WEBB reestablishes the agency of early Islamic authors vis-à-vis one-dimensional readings of their works. On the other hand, he argues that the Jāhiliyya was far from being just the passive and maligned "Other"; rather, it could also play an important role in a positive sense. RIECKEN's discussion of how Abdallah Laroui frames purportedly universal concepts goes to the very heart of the question of "Whose periodization?" By suggesting multiple temporalities, Laroui, not unlike the subaltern school, is able to disentangle local histories from what were represented as universal values. Focusing even more on a micro-level, DETERMANN's article highlights the importance of "minor" historiographical traditions, in his case local and tribal narratives, as challenges to monarchist periodizations. They allow understanding the extent to which an official historiography even in an authoritarian regime is often able (but

---

What really troubles me is ... the thought that perhaps I should have written a book of a different kind. When I wrote it I was mainly concerned to note the breaks with the past: new ways of thought, new words or old ones used in a new way. To some extent I may have distorted the thought of the writers I studied, at least those of the first and second generations: the "modern" element in their thought may have been smaller than I implied, and it would have been possible to write about them in a way which emphasized continuity rather than a break with the past. Albert HOURANI, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798–1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), viii–ix.

<sup>43</sup> Dror ZE'EV, "Back to Napoleon? Thoughts on the Beginning of the Modern Era in the Middle East," *Mediterranean Historical Review* 19, no. 1 (2004): 73–94.

<sup>44</sup> Nelly HANNA, *In Praise of Books: A Cultural History of Cairo's Middle Class, Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2003).

also repeatedly unable) to impose a dominant periodization. Agency is also at the heart of BORRUT's article in his attempt to reconstitute Umayyad "whispers" of periodization. Here he engages in a project that subverts the dominant, basically 'Abbāsid, conceptualization and brings back a marginalized view of history that had been sidelined.

To conclude, we hope that the six contributions to this special issue will contribute to on-going discussions about time and its division into periods by historians, past and present. With their shared concern on how space, subject-matter and agency have influenced these discussions they show that the question of how to fit past events into larger schemes can be fruitfully pursued across a large span of time.